DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 236 581 CS 007 417

AUTHOR Nelson, Robert L.
TITLE How College Students Feel about Their School Reading Experiences.
PUB DATE Oct 83
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Great Lakes Regional International Reading Association Conference (5th, Springfield, IL, October 5-8, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Elementary Secondary Education; Memory; *Reading Attitudes; *Reading Instruction; Reading Materials; *Reading Research; Remedial Reading; *Student Attitudes; *Student Experience; Teacher Characteristics; Teacher Effectiveness; *Teacher Influence; Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

Students in college developmental reading classes were given a questionnaire about the experiences they had had in reading during their elementary and high school years. They were asked questions about (1) the materials they used in former reading classes, (2) books or stories they had found particulary memorable, (3) the effectiveness of classroom reading methods; (4) the ways in which they learned to read, (5) their reading teachers, (6) any teacher remembered in particular, and (7) their ideas on which of three factors listed (methods used to teach reading, materials used to teach reading, or the reading teacher) is most important in becoming a superior reader. Results showed that both female and male students used more positive than negativ words to express their feelings about reading materials and most often mentioned free reading followed by class discussion as the method by which they learned to read. Students directed most negative feelings at the oral, round table system, which could expose them to embarrassment and ridicule. The qualities the students admired most in their teachers were helpfulness, kindness, understanding and warmth. They did not like teachers who were sarcastic, cold, unfair, or too lenient. Finally, students indicated that the major influence on students' reading ability is the teacher. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED236581

HOW COLLEGE STUDENTS FEEL ABOUT THEIR SCHOOL READING EXPERIENCES

Robert L. Nelson

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Robert L. Nelson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 007417

It seems as if all teachers are under fire again. The latest reports are "crying the blues" about our educational deficiencies. Personally, I believe the schools are being used as "whipping boys" for all of society's ills. In 31 years of teaching I have seen many more dedicated, hard working instructors than poor, disinterested teachers. I think, given the conditions, it is amazing that teachers have been able to do as well as they have. Be that as it may I decided it might be revealing to ask the college students I teach about their feelings concerning education and reading in particular. I intend to share these findings with you.

I teach a course at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse called Developmental Reading 105. It is a two credit elective and has proved to be a popular course. We teach nine or ten sections each semester with from 25-30 students enrolled in each section. Most of the enrollees are freshmen although we do get sophomores and even a few juniors and seniors. The course is not remedial in nature, but developmental and covers not only reading improvement but the allied skills such as listening, concentration, memory, and note taking.

The students in these classes were asked to react to a questionnaire concerning their memories of experiences they had had in reading during their elementary and high school years. This questionnaire was devised by the three instructors who teach our 105 course. No names were recorded on the forms to better insure uninhibited answers. The survey consisted of seven questions as follows:

1. The students were asked to check on a given list of words those terms that they felt best described the materials they used in former reading classes in both their elementary and secondary schools. These words ranged from negative words such as dumb and boring to positive words like practical and stimulating. Room was left for them to supply their own terms.

2. Secondly they were asked to list any book or story that for some reason they particularly remembered.

3. The third question asked them to check the words that in their estimation best described the methods by which they learned to read. Again the words listed ranged from the negative, embarrassing and insensitive; to the positive, sensible and stimulating. Room was allowed for both elementary and secondary experiences.

4. In the fourth question the students were simply asked to recall the ways in which they learned to read, such as round the table and individualized.

5. Question five also had a list of words ranging from negative to positive in connotation. This time the students were asked to check those that best applied to their teachers of reading as they remembered them. Room was again allowed for personal terms at both the elementary and secondary levels.

6. The sixth question directly asked the students if they remembered any teacher in particular from their school days and if they did, why they remembered that particular teacher.

7. For the last question those being surveyed were instructed to check which of three factors listed they considered the most important in learning to become a superior reader. The three factors given were; methods used to teach reading, materials used to teach reading, and the teacher of reading.

A total of 420 students completed the survey, 237 female, 183 male. Ages of these people ranged from 18-35 with the vast majority 18 or 19 (317).

The results obtained will be given in percents for ease of comparison. Words were checked for both elementary and secondary levels, but results were very similar for both so separate per cents were not figured for them.

Question 1 - Respondents were asked to check words that described the materials used in former reading classes.

Positive words - male	56%
Negative words - male	44%
Positive words - female	61%
Negative words - female	39%
Positive words (all)	58%
Negative words (all)	42%

The positive words checked most often by females were appropriate and interesting, by males, practical and appropriate. The negative words most often picked by females were simple and difficult, by males, simple and boring.

Question 2 - Asked students to list specific books they remembered. The order of number of times mentioned follows:

		Male	Female
1.	To Kill a Mockingbird (27)	10	17
2.	Huckleberry Finn (17)	9	8
3.	The Outsiders (16)	7	9
4.	Catcher in the Rye (14)	7	7
5.	Of Mice & Men (13)	4	9
5.	The Scarlet Letter (13)	7	6
7.	Lord of the Flies (11)	7	4
7.	Dick & Jane & Spot (11)	2	9
9.	Charlotte's Web (10)	2	8
10.	Tom Sawyer (9)	4	5
10.	The Hobbit (9)	5	4
10.	Grapes of Wrath (9)	5	4

It can be seen that To Kill a Mockingbird was top vote getter for both males and females.

Question 3 - To this question the respondents were asked to check the words that in their opinions best described the methods by which they were taught reading. The results:

Positive words	-	Female	80%
Negative words	-	Female	20%
Positive words	-	Male	77%
Negative words	-	Male	23%
Positive words	-	all	79%
Negative words	-	all	21%

The positive words mentioned most by females were sensible and helpful, by males, the same words, sensible and helpful. The negative words listed most by females were inflexible and embarrassing, by males inflexible, embarrassing, and insensitive.

Question 4 - The fourth question asked the students to list the method of reading they remembered from their school days. Some of these categories obviously overlap, but it is still interesting to note the ranking of the various categories. Following is the list:

			Female	Male
1.	Free reading	177	104	73
2.	Class discussion	132	84	48
3.	Round the table	115	67	48
4.	Oral	68	45	23
5.	Reading groups	31	26	5
6.	Silent	18	14	4
7.	Individualized	11	7	4

Question 5 - This question asked the students to check the terms that they felt best described the teachers they had had for reading. Following are the major results:

Positive words (female)	76%
Negative words (female)	24%
Positive words (male)	68%
Negative words (male)	32%
Positive words (all)	72%
Negative words (all)	28%

The positive words checked most often by the females were: 1. helpful, 2. kind, 3. understanding. Male rankings were exactly the same. Negative terms most often checked by the females were: 1. cold, 2. unfair, and 3. sarcastic. Male negative word rankings were: 1. lenient, 2. cold, 3. sarcastic. Some other terms specifically penciled in by the females included: pushy, boring, impersonal, biased, too busy, and weird. Added male words were: cool, strict, uninformed, and not interested.

Question 6 - There was only one thing asked of the respondents in Question 6. That was whether or not they remembered a teacher for one reason or another. Out of 420 replies, 52 said no teacher stood out in their memories. Of those who remembered a teacher, 69% had pleasant associations, while 31% remembered their teachers in a negative way. Male and female percentages were almost identical. For females there were 69% positive and 31% negative feelings given. For males it was 68% positive and 32% negative.

I would like to share a few of the comments students wrote concerning teachers. They are quite revealing. First the males.

> Yes, there was a teacher in elementary school I remember well. She was the school's reading teacher. We got along great, and she didn't make fun of me.

My fourth grade teacher. He is the only teacher I've had that let me work at my own speed which was faster than most people. He let me work in books that were interesting and on my level. Otherwise in other classes I was bored and got lazy.

This teacher was hard to please. Reminded you of a military officer. This teacher never showed any happy or warm emotions. She was always looking for a reason to yell. The kids were never relaxed with her.

He was the only teacher I knew who didn't think he was hot crap. He was a real person.

My third grade teacher was a boring, worthless hag! She was way too pushy for children of that age.

She had time for everyone even if it meant staying a bit longer or putting up with the same question.

My second grade teacher was very warm, friendly and enthusiastic about reading, thus passing on to me her enthusiasm and love of reading.

She couldn't handle the kids and we had a hell of a time.

He really understood the way I felt and honored my decisions and feelings.

Freedom to choose own material but an iron-fisted demand that it be finished - taught discipline.

Miss R., 6th & 8th grade. She was a great teacher, funny, warm, smart, sensitive. Everything you could ever want.

She catered to everyone's needs. She found difficult material for those above average and treated everyone as equals. She really did care that we learned something.

One English teacher I had when I was a sophomore would pick on kids who couldn't read that well and embarrass them in class. This used to piss me off so bad that I couldn't help but think that these kids would get a bad attitude toward reading.

He made us want to read. He made reading fun for the first time in my life.

Mr. S. was a total character. He often showed us how deviant we were. He wore odd clothes and was really funny.

He was so well-informed, almost as if he had read every book ever printed.

He drank a lot of coffee and was afraid of crowds.

All this teacher did was sit around and look at the girls in the class. Really unfair to the guys in the class.

Mrs. C. was a bleep! She was a mean teacher. Nobody liked her.

1st Grade, Mrs. K. - crayon fights during movies.

Yes, because she had a mustache.

Now for some of the comments from the female students.

I had this teacher who liked to cut people down. She was quite mean and very sarcastic, not understanding at all.

My first grade teacher. I still remember having to go and stand in the hall because I could not figure out one word.

My first grade teacher - she embarrassed me more than once in the methods she used for reading and talking in class. I felt more than once that she made a fool out of me.

A teacher who made us realize that learning doesn't come from homework alone. She made us realize that grades were not the most important things in life, it was your attitude.

Mrs. K. in high school because she was strict and made you work at it - not let you get away with stuff. Yet she was understanding and helpful for those who cared enough to ask.

In 10th grade the teacher was very unfair. She favored the males, and if females asked her a question she wouldn't really give you an answer. They had to find it out for themselves. She was very lenient on males and let them do as they pleased during class.

In first grade I had a nun that I'll always remember because of her compassion and understanding. She had the ability to treat us as individuals.

One teacher in first grade was a very strict teacher. I couldn't comprehend exactly how to read and write papers. She'd take a ruler and hit the top of my desk. I remember I was scared to death and got a very negative feeling about reading. Afraid I wouldn't understand.

He took me aside after class and told me how I could excel if I wanted to. He built up my confidence.

My grade school and reading teacher. She was very old. She hated kids and was real mean to everyone. She always picked her nose.

She was always doing things to help us, getting us to use our minds. She cared about you as a person. Was concerned with our lives outside of school also.

Yes, there is a certain teacher who was well-liked. He treated you like you were growing up - not like you were just a child. He was fair, patient, and had a sense of humor.

Second and third grade I had the same teacher, and he was really mean. He also posted the grades, and it was embarrassing.

Yes, my second grade teacher, when we would read I would get very nervous and suck my thumb, and she would make fun of me in front of my whole class.

I remember elementary teachers used to jump in as soon as a student was stuck on a word, and this was somewhat embarrassing for some.

Yes, she told my mother that I was dumb and wanted to hold me back in school. She never taught me anything I was supposed to learn. If I was so dumb, why did I graduate from high school with honors?

Received very little encouragement - at the time, I really did enjoy reading and had I been encouraged I feel I would have loved reading at an earlier age.

My third grade teacher helped me so much with my reading. She let us read and didn't stop us in the middle of our reading to correct us.

I had one teacher in high school who only took time with the slow readers while the others had nothing to do and learned nothing.

My fourth and fifth grade teacher because she made me feel stupid. It took me awhile to realize I'm not as stupid as she said.

My fifth grade teacher - she always took time right after lunch break to read us a book - long books she would read a chapter a day. She read Hannah's Brave New Year, Charlotte's Web.

An elementary teacher I had made everyone stand up and read a paragraph aloud in history, until one day a girl ran out crying because she had to read it about three times.

My language teacher in eighth grade was very strict, yet very understanding and compassionate toward her students. I found her difficult yet learned the most from her.

He was helpful not only with academic issues, but with other issues. If I needed a shoulder to cry or lean on, he was always willing to take the time.

Mr. F., 7th grade, would assign a story and the next day go over the answers. People didn't read the story, just wrote down the answers when he went over them.

Mrs. G, made everyone stay after school if they had to go to the bathroom while reading was on.

My eleventh grade English teacher. I didn't learn much. He was a joke. It took him twenty minutes to take attendance. When he tried to talk about a story his mind wandered and he just babbled and then sat down.

My fourth grade teacher would never let us use the word nice.

A junior high teacher was a hot head and always seemed never to be pleased.

Yes, because she always rewarded us with a lemon drop for doing our work right.

In first grade she put me in a low reading group that I shouldn't have been in because I was seeing a speech therapist - what does that have to do with reading?

Yes, he was a super person. He made the class interesting by cracking jokes. He was an all-around interesting person to listen to. (He's my uncle.)

And finally a few quickies:

He let us skip out of class to go practice the drums.

He was dull and strange.

He looked like a martian!

Fascinating vignettes indeed. I believe the amazing thing about many of the comments made is the many little details that students appear to remember about their former teachers. It is almost frightening when you think about the impact that a teacher can have on a student's mind.

Question 7 - The final question on the survey simply asked the students to check the factor that they believed to be the most important in learning to become a superior reader. The choices were: methods used to teach reading, materials used to teach reading, and the teacher of reading.

The results were as follows:

Females		Males		All	
Teacher	45.6%	Teacher	42.4%	Teacher	44.0%
Methods	39.7%	Methods	35.5%	Methods	37.6%
Materials	14.7%	Materials	22.1%	Materials	18.4%

Are there any implications that can be drawn from all of the preceding information? I believe there are.

First, it appears that according to 420 former students of reading

our teachers are doing a pretty good job of teaching reading, better than some people would have us believe.

Second, both female and male students checked more positive words than negative words to express their feelings about reading materials as they remembered them. Just the same many negative terms such as simple, difficult and boring were checked. The fact that both simple and difficult were listed seems to point out the necessity that books must be used that fit the particular reader. What is simple for one student could very well be difficult for another. It means that a greater variety of materials needs to be available for students to sift and winnow. A look at the tabulation for the second item gives us an idea of some of the books or at least types of books that should be available to students. Maybe if we surveyed our students more we could better serve their reading needs. Maybe we need to follow the lead of food, department, and book stores and stock what the customers want.

Third, when asked to check words describing the methods by which they learned to read, the respondents clearly indicated positive feelings by a large margin. The technique mentioned most often was free reading following by class discussion. The students seem to be saying, "Hey, give us the time to read and we'll like it. Once we've completed our reading we'll talk about it." Most of the negative feelings for the methods of reading were directed at the oral-round the table system where students could be exposed to embarrassment and even ridicule. So, let's give the students time to read. Let's let them read at their own pace without constant interruptions. Adequate time needs to be allowed for discussion of readings also. If oral reading is used it should be done only after students have become familiar with the material and only for a sensible reason, such as reading the parts in a play or to verify a point

made in a discussion. Oral reading paragraph by paragraph, student by student, row by row, for a full class period, is not the way to go. Student comments were quite clear on this point.

Fourth, without any doubt, the students by a large percentage described their past reading teachers in positive terms. This is encouraging indeed in the light of the constant criticism that teachers seem to receive. The qualities that the students admired most in their teachers were helpfulness, kindness, understanding, fairness, and warmth. They did not like teachers who were sarcastic, cold, unfair, and too lenient. Many of these qualities were mentioned over and over again when students were asked to write about teachers that they had remembered for one reason or another.

It is hard if not impossible being all things to all people, but it seems to me that the teacher who wants to be successful needs to be a human being. He or she should be compassionate and warm, knowledgeable and fair. A teacher needs to learn to listen, to be willing to give an extra minute to a student, to share his enthusiasm for books and learning, to be sensitive, to care. Then too firmness is vital. Over and over the students indicated that they appreciated loving, concerned teachers, but on the other hand they wanted someone who could control the learning situation, one who expected much and demanded much. A teacher needs to realize that there is more to life than the classroom, and books, and tests. There is reverence for life itself.

I would like to quote a part of a letter written to me by a group of senior high school students I was privileged to teach 10 years ago. I think it summarizes concisely what some students think about education.

"We thank you for all the things you've done for us. We want to let you know how much we appreciate your willingness to help us and your true

concern for us as individuals. Above the things you have done for us, we especially appreciate all those things you have not done. You have not crowded us, you've given us room to breathe. In allowing us this freedom, you have given us a chance to discover and meet our own educational goals for the first time in our lives. You have allowed us to find a reason for learning."

Finally, when asked to pick the most important factor in learning to become a superior reader, the students said what we have known for a long time, that it is the teacher who makes the difference in the long run. All the more reason that we need to think about the qualities of teachers just mentioned.

In conclusion, we can feel quite good about this survey. On the whole the college students who responded feel quite positive about their reading experiences. Even though the majority looked favorably upon their past reading materials, methods, and teachers there is room for improvement. We need to look more to our students and less to ourselves. We need to find varied materials to read to fit our diversified populations. We need to give our students freedom to read and freedom to discuss what they read. We need to treat our students with compassion and care, but also challenge them and hold them to the task. We should toot our own horns and let the public know that we're doing our part, and tell them maybe it is time they did theirs!

Let me share a poem with you written by Kendrick Wronski who was a student at Central High School in Red Wing, Minnesota in 1970. His poem won the 1970 Future Teachers of America Writing Competition. The poem, "The Teacher I Want to Be" reads as follows:

I want to be a teacher;
One that reminds you of your big sister,
or your mother,
or even your grandma;
A teacher that's not afraid to laugh
with you,
And never thinks of laughing
at you,
One that comes to school early every day
just for the fun of it,
And stays until you "get it"
just because she wants to help you.
To be a teacher that doesn't make you
do anything,
But you do everything
just because you feel like it - that's what I want.
A teacher who's always happy,
especially when you are,
And one who knows that everybody has bad days,
no matter how big they are;
A teacher who knows that if you hate science,
a nice scientific walk in the sun will help
almost anyone,
and if you're the "almost"
she doesn't just forget about you.
One who says, "I would like to talk to your
parents,"
when you're not even being bad,
A teacher who doesn't forget your birthday--
even if it's on a Saturday.
One who stops to talk,
when she sees you at the supermarket with
your mother;
A teacher who knows what's going on,
especially when you get new shoes;
One who lets you tell the story
sitting at her desk;
A teacher who gives you part of her lunch
when you forget yours,
And one who talks to "those people"
just like she talks to you;
One who welcomes questions,
even if she can't answer them;
A teacher who remembers that your name is Bill
when it's only the second day of school;
One who brings candy on Halloween;
One who tells you that this test is the worst you've
ever done
but wonders if you were feeling well at the time;
One who draws pictures on the blackboard
and they look just like yours;
One who gives you a wild cherry cough drop
because she thinks you are getting a bad cough;
A teacher who hopes you'll do better next time
and you really want to;
One who never reads the same story twice--
unless you ask her to;

One who's always around then you need her--
and even sometimes when you don't;
One who brings you a new jigsaw puzzle
when you're in the hospital having your tonsils
out;
A teacher who asks you if you have any important
plans after school
when she is disappointed with your behavior;
One who has you count the number of steps it
takes to walk home
instead of taking home your numbers book;
One who tells you she'll miss you during summer
vacation
and really means it;
One who knows how it is to be young
and wouldn't be any other way!